



India's Chase of the Secular Mirage

By BS Murthy

The secular cliché of 'unity in diversity' is the political myth that at long last has been done in the postcolonial India. But in reality, India is a habitat of disparate groups with varied agendas, often at conflict with the rest; here are the Hindus, the original inhabitants of the ancient *Arya Varta*, who form the generic majority in its partitioned portion of modern India, who are a fragmented lot on regional grounds, stratified by iron-cast caste system, though united in denying even the basic human rights to the *dalits* amongst them. Besides, its predominant Muslim minority, positions India in the Islamic universe as Dar Al-'Ahd, an infidel territory with an unwritten treaty of non-aggression or peace with the faithful, its indomitable Christian evangelists are ever eager to convert the marginalized sections of the majority community to their religious dispensation, for ostensible salvation.

It was Gandhi's Congress, which helped India earn its freedom from the British yoke that shaped the secular theme of the nebulous Indian democracy, which under Nehru's progeny degenerated into a cynical strategy to politically divide the Hindus on their caste-fault lines, cunningly unite the Muslims in the Islamic separatist fold and covertly support the Christian mission to convert the gullible, all for its electoral gain. This self-serving idea to divide the majority votes and rally with the minority ballots in the electoral arena, which the post-Mandal political outfits in the Cow-belt borrowed, had inculcated the debilitating non-nationalism in India's collective consciousness, which, being in the realms of our every day experience, needs no detailing.

And now, at long last, the majority community, which, by far, has the highest stake in India's unity and integrity, seems to have seen through this pseudo-secular game to bust the nationalist forces at the hustings. But stunned by the new-found nationalism, which is surging into the country's polling booths, resulting in their ouster from the

pinnacles of power, the political false elements have started crying wolf about the majoritarianism threat in the making to the so-called secular idea of India. However, it is another matter that notwithstanding its inimical caste system that needs more vigorous redressal, it is Hindu *sanātana dharma* that swears by *sarva dharma sama bhav*, all faiths have same the same footing, and *वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, the world is but one family. But by casting aspersions on the Hindu nationalism, willy-nilly, the so-called secularists fuel the fundamentalist urges of those Muslims and the Christians, who vouch for the insular togetherness of the faithful based on the divisive diktats of their religions. Thus, notwithstanding the Hindu ethos of togetherness, given the intellectual sophism that aids and abets the Semitic system of separateness, India has come to chase the secular mirage in its own heartland.

But thankfully there are oases in the cantonments of our 'majoritarian' defense forces, in which Masjids, Churches, and Gurudwaras abound with Mandirs, bound by the common faith - to live to serve the Indian nation and die for preserving its sovereignty. Well, the Sikhs have been doing just that for centuries now, and there is no denying that Islam exhorts the believers to go after infidels' throats, but nevertheless, Muslims-in-arms fight, arm in arm, with the Hindu soldiers to slay the intruders from across the borders, who happen to be their co-religionists. True, but for the naïve Hindus, the pastors could cry hoarse from the pulpits of the Churches that there is no scope for salvation for the heathen Hindus, yet the Christian soldiers vie with the Hindus of their regiment to attain martyrdom at India's borders. Mind you, the members of the Indian Armed Forces are no mean in number.

All this, besides proving the bogusness of the secular boggy of Hindu majoritarianism, only brings to the fore the fact that these seculars, along with their liberal cohorts, have been barking up the wrong 'Hindutva' tree to exhibit their exaggerated anxiety over India's religious tolerance allegedly under threat. Maybe owing to ignorance they fail to realize that the Islamic preaching and the Christian teachings, of course based on their scriptures, are unflattering to the Hindu culture and beliefs and that is to say the least. And on that count, there is no faulting the Muslims and the Christians, but at the same time there is no denying that their belief system bleeds India, inhabited by over a billion Hindus. However, Dr. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a Canadian Professor, in his 'Islam in Modern History' (1977) was hopeful that the Indian Muslims would reform and transform Islam thus:

"The question of political power and social organization, so central to Islam, has in the past always been considered in yes or no terms. Muslims have either had political power or they have not. Never before have they shared it with others. Close to the heart of Islam has been the conviction that its purpose includes the structuring of a social community, the organization of the Muslim group into a closed body obedient to the law. It is this conception that seems finally to be proving itself inept in India. The Muslims in India, in fact, face what is a radically new and profound problem: namely how to live with others as equals. Yet it is a question on which the past expression of Islam offers no immediate guidance. Imperative is the willingness to admit that there are problems waiting to be solved.

This awareness has been rare in recent Islam, which has tended to believe that problems have been solved already. That the answers have somehow, somewhere been given and do not have to be worked out afresh with creative intelligence - this idea had deeply gripped, almost imprisoned the minds and souls of many Muslims. The Quran has been regarded as presenting a perfected pattern to be applied rather than as an imperative to seek perfection. Islamic law and Islamic history have been felt

to be a storehouse of solutions to today's difficulties to be ransacked for binding precedent rather than a record of brave dealing with yesterday's difficulties, to be emulated as liberating challenge. Religion has seemed to confine behavior rather than inspire it. The fundamental fallacy of Muslims has been to interpret Islam as a closed system. And that system has been closed not only from outside truth but also from outside people.

The fundamental hopefulness about Indian Muslims, and therefore Indian Islam, is that this community may break through this. It may be forced to have the courage and humility to seek new insights. It may find the humanity to strive for brotherhood with those of other forms of faith. In the past, civilizations have lived in isolation, juxtaposition or conflict. Today we must learn to live in collaboration. Islam, like the others, must prove creative at this point and perhaps it will learn this in India."

But Nehru's secular failure to prod the Indian Muslims into evolving an Indian Islam enabled the Mullah-Maulvi nexus to insensibly push them into the separatist Salahi clutches, the affects of which *India Today* pictured, by way of its survey published in its August 26, 2002 issue, thus:

"In the past six months communalism and Pakistan-sponsored terrorism have grabbed the national headlines. On these issues there is a definite Hindu-Muslim rift. Take the on-again-off-again Ayodhya dispute. On this issue, there seems to be a hardening of stand in favour of building a Ram temple immediately - 43 per cent were in favour six months ago, today it is 47 per cent. Even among Congress voters, 43 per cent want the temple now. Predictably, this is not a solution favoured by Muslims. Equally, support for the temple isn't as enthusiastic in the South and East as in the North and West.

Likewise, while 70 per cent of Hindus regard Pakistan as an enemy - a rare expression of national unity - only 37 per cent of Muslims do so. Indeed, 49 per cent of Muslims have a rather charitable view of Pakistan as an estranged brother, a friend and a future ally. What complicates matters is that among Muslims who are aware, Mohammed Ali Jinnah is regarded as a hero, along with Mahmud of Ghazni and Aurangzeb. The weight of Hindu opinion treats these historical figures as villains.

These are worrying signs and pointers to the emotional gulf between the majority community and the most significant minority. Nor is this rift a persisting relic. The poll indicates that it is the youth (18 to 24-year-olds) that is more aware and belligerent than their elders. This raw, untapped energy is yet to find focus. A positive outlet may take India to new heights; in the wrong hands, it could plunge the country in civil strife. A divided India can swing either way."

That was in 2002, and fifteen years hence, while the Indian Muslims in general have become more faithful in their inward beliefs and outward exhibitions of Islamic tenets, the youth in particular are enamoured of the annihilative adventurism of radical Islam, with some of them even laying their lives for the cause of Baghdadi's Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Arguably, the gradual upsurge of radical Islamism in postcolonial India owes in no small measure to the legacy of Nehru's intellectual backing to the Islamic religious rigidity, augmented, in recent times, by Saudi Arabia's political urge to bring about a Wahabi Umma

Maybe, history beckons Narendra Modi to help bring about the Indian Islam into the realms of Wilfred's dream, and paradoxically, the opportunity could as well lie in Ayodhya's vexed Ram Janmabhoomi dispute. Let us face the fact that while the Islamic precepts and practices make Muslims the religious square pegs in India's Hindu

cultural round holes, its religious callings such as haj and its cultural moorings in Arabic moulds ensure their emotional distance from the very land in which their ancestors lived as Hindus. Thus, for the Indian Islam to evolve, it is imperative that the Muslims should have their unique Islamic icon on the Indian soil to rival Kabaa, the pilgrimage to which is within the reach of every believer in this land that is unlike the haj to Mecca that is the privilege of a faithful few. And what can be a better place to host that than the banks of Sarayu across Ayodhya, the *janma bhoomi* of Rama, the ethical mascot of India? What is more, if the pilgrims of Ayodhya and the hajis across the river are encouraged to visit each other's place of worship, won't that become an enabling tradition to break the Hindu-Muslim religious barriers in the long run? Possible, but the Mullah-driven Arabic-centered Muslim mindset would be averse to that, and yet, the State and the society alike should push and prod the recalcitrant towards that goal, which, when achieved, is bound to usher in Indian Islam.

That way, as and when Indian Islam takes roots in India, then Indian Muslims would regard Abdul Hamid the soldier, who sacrificed his life for India in its war against Pakistan, as a hero and not Mahmud of Ghazni the pillager of Somnath. Likewise, APJ Abdul Kalam the Bhagvad-Gita-reading Muslim, and not Aurangzeb the bigoted Musalman, who would inspire the Indian Muslims to come out of their Semitic scriptural shell to venture into the arena of Hindu philosophy. As for the Christian evangelism, it should be made loud and clear that belittling the Hindu dieties and deriding the native customs is not the way to voice the gospel and proselytizing by means fair or foul for harvesting the poor Hindu souls should cease forthwith for India's demographic good. That is when; living in the all-encompassing oasis of Hindutva, India would stop its futile chase of the secular mirage.